Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS): An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study

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Abstract

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states: "The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States' efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001." The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.

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Contents

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List of Tables

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Glossary

ABT	Ansarullah Bangla Team
AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
AQS	Al-Qaeda Syria
ASD (SO/LIC)	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
CT	Counterterrorism
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
HM	Hizb-ul-Mujahideen
HUJI	Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam
HuJI-B	Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh
HuM	Harkat-ul-Mujahideen
IM	Indian Mujahideen
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence Agency
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
JMB	Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh
LeT	Lashkar-e-Taiba
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
PNS	Pakistan Naval Ship
SDGT	Specially Designated Global Terrorist
TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan

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Introduction

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, "The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States' efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001." The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.[1]

Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include these topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core's current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.

2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.

3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.

4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

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[1] Julia McQuaid, Jonathan Schroden, Pamela G. Faber, P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Alexander Powell, Zack Gold, David Knoll, and William Rosenau, *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda,* CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

In order to answer the first four questions posed by Section 1228, CNA conducted eight case studies on groups affiliated and associated with Al-Qaeda.[2] The case studies were then used to conduct a cross-case comparative analysis.

This document is a stand-alone version of the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) case study used in the *Independent Assessment*. CNA is publishing each of the eight case studies separately for the convenience of analysts and others who may have a regional or functional focus that corresponds to a specific case study. For the context in which this case study was used and for CNA's full findings, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda.*[3]

The present case study is organized as follows: First, we introduce AQIS by highlighting its leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. Second, we explain the evolution of the group by phases, from its origins to the present day. Third, we outline the security vulnerabilities in the areas of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan where AQIS operates. Fourth, we outline the U.S. approach to countering AQIS. We conclude the case study with a discussion on whether the U.S. has, at any time, effectively defeated, dismantled, or disrupted the group.

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[2] These groups include: Al-Qaeda "core," Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shebab, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda Syria (AQS), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

[3] McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda.*

Overview of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) was founded in late 2014.[4] While the group seeks to operate across South Asia, including in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indian, Burma, Bangladesh, and Kashmir, its leadership is based in Pakistan, and all of its successful attacks have been carried out in Pakistan or Bangladesh.[5] The group attempted to carry out one high-profile attack on a Pakistani and U.S. naval forces in 2014 that largely failed, and has since carried out a small number of hit-and-run assassinations of secular figures in Bangladesh and Pakistan. American and Pakistani counterterrorism operations have successfully targeted at least ten senior AQIS leaders since its formation.[6] The United States designated AQIS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) per Executive Order 13224.[7][8]

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[4] Counter Extremism Project, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS),* accessed January 20, 2017, http://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Al-Qaeda%20in%20the%20Indian%20Subcontinent%20%28AQIS%29-09142016.pdf. As with other jihadist groups, AQIS is known by a variety of names, including Ansar al Islam, Jamaat Qaidat al-jihad fi'shibhi al-qarrat al-Hindiy, Jamaat Qaidat al-Jihad fi'shibhi al-Qarrat al-Hindiya, Organisation of the Base of Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent, Qaedat al-Jihad, and Qaedat al-Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent.

[5] Alastair Reed, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: A New Frontline in the Global Jihadist Movement?* International Centre for Counter-Terrorism–The Hague (ICCT), May 2015, accessed 1/20/2017, doi: 10.19165/2016.2.02, https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ICCT-Reed-Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-May2016.pdf.

[6] Shreya Das, "The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent," International Security Observer, May 4, 2015, 2015, accessed 3/3/2017, http://securityobserver.org/the-emergence-of-Al-Qaeda-in-the-indian-sub-continent/#_edn1.

[7] U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," accessed January 30, 2017, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm.

[8] U.S. Department of State, "Individuals and Entities Designated by the State Department Under E.O. 13224," accessed January 30, 2017, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/143210.htm.

Leadership and structure

Osama Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, named Asim Omar the emir of AQIS. Omar, likely of Indian origin, is a skilled speaker and noted theologian, and has authored multiple books promoting jihad. He has been previously associated with several jihadi groups, including Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (HUJI) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), and was a commander in Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Before being named emir, Omar was the head of Al-Qaeda's sharia committee for Pakistan and a high-ranking media propagandist, assuming this role after previous head propagandist Abu Yahya Al-Libi was killed in a 2012 U.S. drone strike.[9] Choosing an Indian as the emir represents a departure for AQ,[10] and demonstrates an attempt to unify jihadi groups across South Asia.[11] AQ previously attempted to set up a branch in South Asia under the leadership of Ilyas Kashmiri, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2011.[12] Historically, AQ has faced difficulties recruiting jihadis in India itself, and has relied on militants from surrounding countries.

Evidence indicates that AQIS is broken down into regional affiliates: Mainul Islam, chief coordinator for AQIS in Bangladesh, was arrested in Dhaka in July 2015. Shahid Usman, head of AQIS in Karachi, was arrested in December 2014.

Other leadership figures include Ahmad Farouq, who was formerly AQ's head of preaching and media in Pakistan. He was chosen to be deputy emir and a member of the AQIS's executive council. Farouq, who was an American citizen, was killed on January 15, 2015 by a U.S. drone strike.[13] Farouq was mentioned in a 2010 letter to Osama Bin Laden from senior AQ commander Atiyah abd al Rahman as "in charge of Al Sahab [AQ's propaganda arm] in Urdu."[14] Osama Mahmoud is AQIS's current spokesman. Atta ur Rahman is a key Pakistani militant. Security officials in Karachi

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[9] Abdul Basit, "Asim Umar—'New Kid on the Block'?" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 6, no. 10 (2014), accessed 3/2/2017.

[10] Das, "The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent."

[11] Basit, "Asim Umar—'New Kid on the Block'?"

[12] Das, "The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent."

[13] Anurag Chandran, "Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten," AEI Critical Threats, September 3, 2015, accessed January 20, 2017, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaeda-in-the-indian-subcontinent-almost-forgotten.

[14] Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "US killed AQIS deputy emir, shura member in January drone strikes," Long War Journal, April 12, 2015, accessed 1/19/2017, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/us-killed-aqis-deputy-emir-shura-member-in-january-drone-strikes.php.

believe that Rahman is the bridge between AQIS and AQ central,[15] while Asim Omar may play more of a figurehead role.[16] Imran Ali Siddiqi, a shura council member, was killed by a U.S. drone strike on October 11, 2014. Another shura member, Qari Imran was killed by a U.S. drone strike in January 2015.

Relationship with Al-Qaeda core

There is little information available on the relationship between AQIS and the Al-Qaeda core, although al-Zawahiri's direct involvement in the selection of AQIS senior leadership suggests that a relatively close relationship exists.

Ideology and goals

It is likely that the ideology and goals of AQIS are closely aligned with those of the AQ core.[17] These goals include conducting attacks against the U.S. and its interests in the region, freeing Indian Muslims from persecution, establishing shariah law, establishing a caliphate in the Indian subcontinent, and defending Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban against foreign aggression.[18]

Funding

Sources of AQIS funding remain uncertain. It is suspected that AQIS is funded directly from AQ central.[19] It has no known autonomous sources of revenue.[20]

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[15] Counter Extremism Project, "Atta ur Rahman a.k.a. Naeem Bukhari," accessed 3/3/2017, https://www.counterextremism.com/people/atta-ur-rahman-aka-naeem-bukhari.

[16] Das, "The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent."

[17] Stanford University, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent," Mapping Militant Organziations, accessed 1/20/2017, https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/615.

[18] "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent," Mapping Militant Organziations.

[19] Counter Extremism Project, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).*

[20] Reed, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent."

Evolution of AQIS by Phase

Phase zero: The road to AQIS—jihadi groups in the Indian Subcontinent (1980s–2014)

South Asia has a long history of jihadi movements dating back to the 18th century. In the 1980s, South Asia was the key staging ground for the training of jihadi anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan, and contributed to the rise and increased sophistication of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[21] The first AQ commanders emerged from the veterans of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan. Other jihadi groups that have focused on the link between the Indian Subcontinent and the ultimate battle between believers and nonbelievers include the Pakistani offshoot of the Taliban, TTP; the militant Islamist group Jamaat ul Ahrar; and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).[22]

In India, the jihadi movement is closely associated with jihadi groups in Pakistan. Most attacks are carried out in the Jammu and Kashmir region, where Azad Kashmir-based militant groups fight to unite the disputed region with Pakistan. Separately, Pakistan-based militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) have conducted multiple attacks within India. The Indian Mujahideen (IM) is perhaps the most well-known India-based militant group, and is considered to be associated with LeT.[23]

LeT, based in Kashmir, is one of the most powerful of these groups and is responsible for high-profile attacks in India, including the 2001 Indian Parliament

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[21] Husain Haqqani, "Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent," Hudson Institute, March 27, 2015, accessed 3/3/2017, https://www.hudson.org/research/11167-prophecy-the-jihad-in-the-indian-subcontinent.

[22] Husain Haqqani, "Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent," Hudson Institute.

[23] Anurag Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten," AEI Critical Threats, September 3, 2015, accessed 1/20/2017, http://www.criticalthreats.org/Al-Qaeda/chandran-Al-Qaeda-in-indian-subcontinent-backgrounder-september-3-2015.

attack and the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed 160 people.[24] Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) is reported to have ties with LeT, which has never carried out an attack against Pakistan.[25] Other major groups operating in Kashmir include Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM).[26]

Other militant groups based in Pakistan view Afghanistan as their primary target. These groups operate from Pakistan's semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Chief among these groups is the highly influential Haqqani Network, which is an important part of the Afghan Taliban and has ties with AQ. Militant groups that view Pakistan and the West as their primary targets include TTP, which seeks is to overthrow the Pakistani government, but also attacks Western interests.[27]

Bangladeshi militant groups are largely focused on establishing an Islamist regime in Bangladesh. These groups include Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Newer groups include Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and Ansar al Islam Bangladesh, which have been responsible for killing several secular bloggers and have strong links to AQIS, to be discussed below.[28]

Phase one: Formation and early ambitions (2014–2015)

AQIS was officially founded on September 3, 2014 by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who announced the establishment of new branch of AQ on the Indian subcontinent. The formation of AQIS was announced by al-Zawahiri in the first edition of AQ's magazine *Resurgence:* "[T]his organization is a direct result of the merger of several groups....In guidance [from Zawahiri], the leaders of these Jihadi groups have joined forces to coalesce into … Jama'ah Qa'eda al jihad in the Subcontinent."[29]

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[24] Bruce Riedel, *Modeled on Mumbai? Why the 2008 India attack is the best way to understand Paris,* Brookings Institution, November 14, 2015 https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/11/14/modeled-on-mumbai-why-the-2008-india-attack-is-the-best-way-to-understand-paris/

[25] Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten."

[26] Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten."

[27] Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten."

[28] Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten."

[29] Reed, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.*

In a simultaneous video announcement, al-Zawahiri stated that it took more than two years to "gather the mujahedeen in the Indian subcontinent into a single entity."[30] The announcement focused on the reconciliation between jihadi groups that had previously fought one another, and referenced several martyred jihadis targeted and killed in U.S. drone strikes over the past decade. The exact groups that merged to form AQIS have never been officially confirmed by AQ.

AQIS likely comprises groups that have close operational relationships before 2014, including the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, Harakat-ul-Muhajideen, Harakat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami and Brigade 313, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the Indian Mujahideen (a front for Lashkar-e-Taiba), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Turkistan Islamic Party, Junood al Fida, and other groups based in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.[31]

There is widespread speculation that AQIS was established as a response to a strategic environment that turned against AQ in 2014. Shortly before announcing AQIS's formation, al-Zawahiri had publicly disavowed ISIS, which then unexpectedly conquered vast territory in Iraq and Syria and declared a caliphate. The ISIS conquests became a lure for recruits who otherwise may have considered joining AQ.[32] Though al-Zawahiri claimed the formation of AQIS took years of planning and alluded that it did not have to do with ISIS's rise, the reality of ISIS's success has impacted the way AQIS is perceived, which is largely as a reactive attempt to counterbalance ISIS. That is, because AQ was unable to seize new territory or carry out large-scale attacks in the United States or Europe, AQ turned instead to expansion.[33] In the video announcing AQIS, al-Zawahiri, Asim Umar and Osama Mahmoud focused on facets of their new branch's ideology that distinguished it from ISIS—without ever mentioning ISIS by name—including the branch's focus on gradual

[30] Ellen Barry, "Al Qaeda Opens New Branch on Indian Subcontinent," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2014 accessed January 19, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/05/world/asia/al-qaeda-announces-new-branch-on-indian-subcontinent.html.

[31] Bill Roggio, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent incorporates regional jihadist groups," Long War Journal, September 5, 2014, accessed January 19, 2017, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives /2014/09/analysis_al_qaeda_in.php.

[32] Ellen Barry and Mansi Choksi, "4 Young Men Head for Iraq, Citing Fight for Islam, and India Wonders if More Will Follow," *The New York Times,* August 4, 2014, 2014, accessed January 26, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/05/world/asia/india-shaken-by-case-of-muslim-men-missing-in-iraq.html?_r=2&mtrref=undefined&gwh=5727E2CAC66194F0B672065BEB8CF6B7&gwt=pay&assetType=nyt_now.

[33] Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

consensus building, as opposed to the implied ISIS method of imposing itself on others.[34]

Alternatively, AQIS may have formed as part of a strategic readjustment to the drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, which, according to AQ, allows experienced jihadi fighters to broaden their reach and relocate to South Asia, trading the "far" enemy for the "near" enemy.[35]

In a speech introducing the new branch, AQIS spokesman Osama Mahmoud stated that waging jihad against the United States is its primary goal.[36] In reality, AQIS poses little if any threat to the United States, and its main aim is the liberation of the Indian subcontinent from "infidel" occupation and the restoration of the caliphate through violent jihad.[37] The Indian subcontinent has significant symbolic value for AQ, as it is the prophesized site in the Hadith of the great battle between believers and nonbelievers called the Ghazwa-e-Hind before the end of days.[38]

On September 6, 2014, three days after the announcement of AQIS's founding, the group attempted its first and only large-scale spectacular attack, which was thwarted. AQIS boarded the PNS *Zulfiqar,* a Pakistani Navy frigate, in an attempt to launch missiles on U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf. The attack was allegedly carried out partly by Pakistani naval officers recruited by AQIS. Although AQIS seized the Pakistani ship, the attempt to fire upon the U.S. ships failed. During the attack, three militants and one petty officer were killed. AQIS claimed responsibility for the attack on Twitter. The attack demonstrated the ambitious scale of AQIS, but also its weakness, since it was unable to successfully carry out its premiere operation. AQIS spokesman Osama Mahmoud issued a statement claiming responsibility for the attack on September 10, 2014. In a statement, Mahmoud declared that the attack was "a plan to strike [at] America's military strength on the seas."[39]

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[34] Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences.*

[35] Shaul Shay, "AQIS: Rooting out Al-Qaeda's New Branch," Diplomatist, October 2014, accessed July 25, 2017, http://www.diplomatist.com/dipom10y2014/article012.html.

[36] Roggio, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent incorporates regional jihadist groups."

[37] Das. "The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent."

[38] Haqqani, "Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent."

[39] Shaul Shay, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and 'Jihad on the Seas'," International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, November 25, 2014, accessed January 20, 2017, https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1256/Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent.

Phase two: Small-scale attacks and relative silence (2015–Present)

All other AQIS attacks have been much more limited in scope and have consisted of largely hit-and-run assassinations of popular secular figures in Pakistan and Bangladesh, including scholars, bloggers, social activists and authors, as well as attacks on Pakistani police. These kinds of attacks have occurred since 2013. In a May 2015 video, Emir Asim Omar claimed responsibility for the murders of three prominent Bangladeshis and two notable Pakistanis.[40] In the video, Omar connects the murders to other terrorist attacks, including the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris, stating that the jihadists "have taught a lesson to blasphemers in France, Denmark, Pakistan and now in Bangladesh."[41] The video was released in several languages and includes English subtitles. AQIS appears to collaborate with other jihadi groups in kidnapping and extortion.[42]

It is unclear whether AQIS has fully subsumed local jihadi groups. On several occasions, local militants associated with AQIS have taken responsivity for attacks using the name of their sub-group. These attacks have later been attributed to AQIS. For instance, ABT cleric Jashimuddin Rahmani was one of several defendants found guilty in December 2015 of the murder of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider. ABT members have also been arrested in connection with the murder of liberal blogger Niloy Neel.

AQIS has continued to compete with the Islamic State (IS) for influence in South Asia. In an early 2015 issue of *Dabiq*, IS's glossy propaganda magazine, AQ defector Abu Jarir ash-Shamali criticizes AQ—and AQIS specifically—impugning Asim Umad and Ahamad Farouq's ability to lead, and highlighting IS's goal of controlling the jihadist community in South Asia.[43]

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[40] Ellen Barry, "Al Qaeda Branch Claims Responsibility for Bangladeshi Blogger's Killing," *The New York Times,* May 3, 2015, accessed January 19, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/world/asia/bangladesh-al-qaeda-indian-subcontinent-attack-on-bloggers.html.

[41] Thomas Joscelyn, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent leader says attacks on 'blasphemers' ordered by Zawahiri," Long War Journal, May 3, 2015, accessed January 30, 2017, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/05/Al-Qaeda-in-the-indian-subcontinent-says-attacks-on-blasphemers-ordered-by-zawahiri.php.

[42] Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten."

[43] Thomas Joscelyn, "The Islamic State's curious cover story," Long War Journal (2015), accessed March 3, 2017, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/01/al_qaeda_defector_fe.php.

Outlook

Arguably the weakest and least active of the remaining AQ affiliates, AQIS's threat to the U.S. homeland is minimal. The threat to U.S. interests in the region is also low. AQIS affiliated groups have, however, demonstrated an ability to attack high-profile secular leaders and influencers in Bangladesh, and have attacked security infrastructure and police officers in Pakistan. These low-casualty events are largely symbolic in nature and serve as a reminder of the existence of AQIS, which otherwise remains relatively quiet. AQIS's ability to gain support and carry out attacks in India has been extremely limited.

If the assumption that AQIS was formed in response to the rise of ISIS is accurate, then the relative decline of ISIS in Iraq and Syria may portend increased funding to AQIS from AQ central. Yet overall, AQIS has failed to carry out a single attack of strategic importance since its failed hijacking of the PNS *Zulfiqa.*

Security Vulnerabilities in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan

The independent assessment involved analyzing the security environment in which each affiliate or associate operated. We conducted the environmental analysis on the assumption that the success of an Al-Qaeda affiliate or associate is based not solely on resources, funding and leadership structure, but also on a permissive environment with security vulnerabilities.

Table 1 below describes the vulnerabilities in the countries where AQIS has a significant presence, namely Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. These vulnerabilities include internal conflict, history of violent jihadism, government illegitimacy, demographic instabilities, security sector ineffectiveness, and neighbor in crisis.

Table 1.   Vulnerabilities in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (2017)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	• Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are suffering from internal conflicts. • Afghanistan has faced an armed insurgency since the Taliban were removed from power in 2001. As of November 2016 the Long War Journal estimated that the Taliban controlled 42 districts out of 407, and contested 55.[44] Additionally, the presence of multiple terrorist groups capable of carrying out attacks (including the Islamic State) exacerbates violence in the country.

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[44] Bill Roggio, "Afghan government 'has lost territory to the insurgency,'" The Long War Journal, February 1, 2017.

	• Pakistan suffers from internal conflict based in its restive Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where militants attempting to overthrow the Pakistani Government reside.[45] Attacks planned in the FATA are launched in other parts of the country.
History of Violent Jihadism	• All three countries have a history of violent jihadism. • The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a lightning rod, bringing together jihadist militants from across the world. The relationships that many jihadists made with one another while in Afghanistan were lasting.[46] • Pakistan played an important role as a staging area for militants attempting to enter Afghanistan in the 1980s. Furthermore, it is suspected that Pakistani ISI aided mujahedeen fighting the Soviets.[47] • While less pronounced than Pakistan or Afghanistan, Bangladesh has a history of violent jihadism as well. Several Islamic extremist groups were founded in, and operate throughout, Bangladesh. These include Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and Ansar al Islam Bangladesh.[48] These groups have demonstrated varying degrees of capability. JMB, for example, carried out a series of coordinated bomb attacks in 2005,[49] and ABT has murdered secular bloggers and religious minorities. Certain extremist groups operating in Bangladesh date back over 20 years.
Government Illegitimacy	• Many people view the current Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as corrupt and illegitimate. Under the current power-sharing agreement, the National Unity Government brings together two political rivals, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah to share power. In practice, however, President Ghani and CEO Abdullah are using their appointments to appoint allies, increasing partisanship across the board.[50]

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[45] Reza Jan, "FATA Conflict Maps," American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project, February 24, 2010.

[46] "The Abu Sayyaf-Al-Qaeda Connection," ABC News, December 20, 2001.

[47] Michael Rubin, "Who Is Responsible for the Taliban?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs,* March 2002.

[48] Anurag Chandran, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten*, AEI Critical Threats, September 3, 2015.

[49] "Nationwide Bombing Campaign in Bangladesh," Jamestown Foundation, Publication: Terrorism Focus Volume: 2 Issue: 16.August 19, 2005.

[50] "Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government," International Crisis Group, Report Nº 285, 10 April 2017.

	• In Bangladesh, the current government under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been accused of using Islamic militancy as a political pretext to crack down on the opposition party.[51] She has also recently attempted to excuse the actions of Islamists in the country to prevent criticism of her stance towards Islam. • The government of Pakistan has long-suffered from questions about its legitimacy. For example, many view the government as military dictatorship that is backed by foreign funder, including the United States, to prop it up.
Demographic Instabilities	• Afghanistan faces numerous difficulties stemming from its demographics, starting with a general lack of knowledge. There has never been a complete national census taken in Afghanistan.[52] Furthermore, the country contains many different ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara, and Uzbeks. Finally, Afghanistan has a very young population, with over 60% of Afghans under the age of 24, according to the *CIA World Factbook*.[53]
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	• Afghan Government security institutions are unable to exert control over its entire population or land mass, as evidenced by the amount of territory controlled by the Taliban. Additionally, continued insider attacks by militants posing as members of Afghan security institutions further reduces confidence in the ability of the security sector to protect the Afghan people.[54]
Neighbor in Crisis	• Pakistan, which shares a 1,500 mile-long contested border with Afghanistan, deals with spillover violence from the Afghan conflict. This is exacerbated by the relative ease with which militants can move across the border.[55]

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[51] "Bangladesh's prime minister uses piety to mask misrule," The Economist, June 1, 2017.

[52] Ali Karimi, "Afghanistan's Demographic Drought," *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2014.

[53] "Afghanistan," *CIA World Factbook*, last updated May 30, 2017.

[54] Javid Ahmad, "What Drives Insider Attacks in Afghanistan?" Foreign Affairs, April 5, 2017.

[55] "The Many Paths to Secure Pakistan's Border," STRATFOR, February 1, 2017, https://worldview.stratfor.com/image/many-paths-secure-pakistans-border/.

U.S. Approach to Counter AQIS

The U.S. approach to countering AQIS is summarized in Table 2 as of 2017.

Table 2.   U.S. approaches to AQIS (2017)

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	• The U.S. has utilized unilateral direct action in order to target AQIS leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan.[56] At least 4 AQIS leaders (as well as a number of the group's rank and file fighters) have been killed since the formation of the group in 2014.[57]
Advise, Assist, and Accompany	• The U.S. partners with Afghan Security Forces to enable CT operations.[58] In late 2015, the U.S. conducted a raid with Afghan commandos against an AQIS training camp in southern Afghanistan.[59]
Intelligence and Information Sharing	• The U.S. has increased intelligence sharing with Bangladesh to help counter terrorism.[60] This is likely due to the rise of both ISIL and AQIS as forces in Bangladesh. • It has been reported that Indian intelligence agencies have worked

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[56] Bill Roggio, "US military kills AQIS leaders, fighters in southern Afghanistan," Long War Journal, April 26, 2017; Bill Roggio, "AQIS announces death of 2 senior leaders in US operation," Long War Journal, November 21, 2014.

[57] Bill Roggio, "US military kills AQIS leaders, fighters in southern Afghanistan," Long War Journal, April 26, 2017; Bill Roggio, "AQIS announces death of 2 senior leaders in US operation," Long War Journal, November 21, 2014.

[58] Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler, "A View from the CT Foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan," CTC *Sentinel*, February 22, 2017.

[59] Thomas Joscelyn, "Al-Qaeda's Kandahar training camp 'probably the largest' in Afghan War," Long War Journal, October 31, 2015.

[60] John Kerry, "Remarks on U.S. – Bangladesh Partnership," U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh, August 29, 2016.

	closely with American counterparts. Their collaboration is said to have led to the State Department designation of AQIS as a foreign terrorist organization."[61]
Train & Equip Partner for CT	• As part of the Coalition's train, advise, and assist mission in Afghanistan, Afghan special forces are trained for CT missions. • In June 2016 the United States announced that Bangladesh would join the U.S. Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, which focuses on "providing CT support to partner nations and augmenting U.S. capability to support partners in CT operations."[62] However, as of mid-2017, it is unclear if Bangladesh has received any funding from this program.
Establish US Posture in Theater to Support Persistent Operations	• The U.S. CT posture in the region, specifically its presence in Afghanistan, indirectly supports counter-AQIS efforts in that country, as demonstrated by the fall 2015 raid on an AQIS training camp in Afghanistan.

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQIS?

Given the fact that AQIS was only established in 2014, it is difficult to assess the U.S. "approach" as such. There is also a seam issue, which further complicates efforts to assess U.S. efforts. As AQIS operates in some of the same countries as AQ core, it is unclear if actions taken against AQIS leaders are a result of their affiliation with AQIS specifically, or Al-Qaeda in general. U.S. officials have claimed that AQIS and AQ core share a close relationship, but it is unclear to what extent this defines the U.S. approach to the two groups.[63]

The U.S. has had limited success **disrupting** AQIS' training and ability to control territory, as evidenced by the destruction of a large training camp in southern

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[61] Shubhajit Roy, "US puts chief of Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent on terror list," Indian Express, July 1, 2016.

[62] Department of Defense Budget, "Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund: Fiscal Year (FY 2017)," February 2016; https://bd.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-fifth-u-s-bangladesh-partnership-dialogue/.

[63] Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler, "A View from the CT Foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan," CTC *Sentinel*, February 22, 2017.

Afghanistan in late 2015. However, the surprise expressed by coalition military leaders in discovering the camp suggests that there is not a coordinated strategy for searching out AQIS training nodes. Similarly, the U.S. has successfully targeted a number of AQIS leaders, removing them from the battlefield. This may have **dismantled** attack networks, and may help account for the lack of sophistication of AQIS attacks to date.

The U.S. has not **defeated** AQIS, and has failed to eliminate AQIS's capacity or its will to continue fighting. AQIS has thus far failed to carry out any spectacular (or even truly noteworthy) attacks on the U.S. or its interests. This may cause the U.S. to pay it relatively little attention given the existence of high-threat groups such as AQAP and ISIL. However, it would be a mistake to correlate this reality with actions taken by the U.S. As a relatively new group, AQIS may simply be finding its footing in its area of operations. The presence of ISIL-affiliated and inspired groups in the region may also pose a recruiting problem for AQIS, further reducing its capability to carry out complex attacks.

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQIS?

AQIS emerged as a distinct entity in September 2014. The internal conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan had been going on for many years at that point. Rather than AQIS causing these conflicts, the emergence of AQIS can be attributed in part to the security and governance vacuums the conflicts created. AQIS leadership resides in Pakistan because internal conflict limits the ability of the Pakistani Government to exert influence in the FATA (and due to the history of violent jihadism in that area). However, once established, the presence of AQIS exacerbates violence, which prolongs internal conflict. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Hasina's rejection of the notion of foreign terrorist influence (and her treatment of the opposition party) allowed AQIS space to operate in the country. Continued attacks against religious minorities and secular bloggers further undercut the government's legitimacy. Vulnerabilities prep the environment for the emergence of terrorist groups; once established, terrorist groups continue to degrade the vulnerabilities, making them even more difficult to address.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

AQIS is a relatively new affiliate, and as such there have not been any substantial changes in the U.S. approach to the group. Rather than shifts in policy over time, it may be useful to think about the U.S. approach to AQIS as shifting by country affected. In Pakistan, the U.S. takes a unilateral direct action approach to target the

group's leaders. However, the U.S. has been taking a direct action approach in Pakistan to target Al-Qaeda-Core leaders since before the formation of AQIS, so it is not clear how much has truly changed with the creation of AQIS. In Afghanistan, the Coalition trains, advises, assists, and accompanies the relevant Afghan forces to carry out CT raids. The U.S. also acts unilaterally against AQIS in Afghanistan. In Bangladesh and India, the U.S. focuses more on intelligence and information sharing. These differences in approaches are reflective of the unique relationships the U.S. has with the various countries.

Conclusion

In this case study, we examined AQIS's leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. We also examined how the group has evolved over time. We outlined the vulnerabilities in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan's security environment that AQIS has exploited, and the relative effectiveness of the U.S. government's approaches to counter AQIS over time. For the full context in which this case study was used, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.[64]

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[64] McQuaid, et. al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

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